Journal of the Short Story in English
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

30 | Spring 1998
Varia

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Édition électronique
URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/146
ISSN : 1969-6108

Éditeur
Presses universitaires d'Angers

Édition imprimée
Date de publication : 1 mars 1998
ISSN : 0294-04442

Référence électronique
Raymond-Jean Frontain, « Baldwin's "The Outing" and the sacral quality of male love », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [En ligne], 30 | Spring 1998, mis en ligne le 17 juillet 2008, consulté le 21 avril 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/146

Baldwin's "The Outing" and the sacral quality of male love

Raymond-Jean Frontain

1 In a 1973 interview, James Baldwin protests American paranoia on the question of homosexuality. "[L]ove comes in very strange packages," he observes; "the trick is to say yes to life" (qtd. in Leeming 309). The difficulty of "say[ing] yes to life" is at the heart of Baldwin's exploration of homosexual relationships in his fiction. David's feeling of suffocation in *Giovanni's Room* is indicative of his fear of loving another male, a discomfort which has tragic consequences for them both; Vivaldo's suppression of his feelings for Rufus precipitates, in part, the latter's suicide in *Another Country*; and even after years in a caring relationship with Jimmy, Arthur Montana remains unable to love freely and dies alone of a heart attack in the men's room of a London pub in *Just above My Head*. As I have shown elsewhere, Baldwin relies upon the biblical story of David's grief over the death of Jonathan, who had loved him "as his own soul" (1 Sam. 18.1), to carry the weight of meaning in his novels where lament at the loss of a man whom the survivor loved "passing the love of women" (2 Sam. 1.26) is central. Baldwin's novels are in large part elegies by a survivor who understands the significance of what he has lost only after it is too late.

2 As significant, however, is Baldwin's concern with the adolescent male on the verge of sexual self-discovery who is just unwrapping that "strange package," love. The question of whether he'll say "yes" to life or be tormented by his homosexuality is treated in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as John Grimes wrestles with his feelings for Elisha[1] in *Giovanni's Room* where David's boyhood abandonment of his friend Joey after a night of sexual experimentation anticipates his rejection in adulthood of Giovanni; in *Another Country* where Eric experiences "an eternal,... healing transformation" (206) through his adolescent interracial affair with LeRoy (who "contained the mystery which had [Eric] in the throat," 204); in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* where Leo Proudhammer's attempt to comfort his older brother, Caleb, brings about his sexual initiation; and in *Just above My Head* where teenagers Arthur and Crunch discover love--with its terror of

"being carried away from the shore" (208)-- in a boarding house room one Saturday afternoon in Georgia.

3 It is the very "otherness" of homosexuality that allows it to figure the mystery of life itself for Baldwin--exciting and confusing, as prone to create guilt and self-doubt as to inspire the most powerful exhileration. The question is, How will the boy respond after his first homosexual engagement? Will he dare accept his authentic self, grow in integrity, and continue to share with others the strange gift of love, as Eric, Arthur, and Leo do to varying degrees? Or will he be emotionally dwarfed, unable to love fully and freely, as happens to David, Crunch, and Caleb? Much of the power of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* derives from Baldwin's decision not to take the novel's action past John Grimes's adolescent awakening; the reader has no way of knowing what will happen to the boy, making the novel finally as mysterious to the reader as his own experience is to John.

4 An adolescent boy's awakening to life and his response to that "strange package," love, is the subject of one of Baldwin's earliest published short stories, "The Outing" (1951), which--as biographer David Leeming (75) reports--is "an outgrowth" of *Crying Holy*, the novel that Baldwin worked on for ten years before revamping it as *Go Tell It on the Mountain*[2] Significantly, "The Outing" uses the biblical David story to suggest not the elegiac quality of a lost or failed relationship, but the sacral quality of male love[3] Although knowledge of the myth allows the reader to anticipate the grief that will presumably come to the principals should Johnnie's father discover his son's homosexuality (Saul denigrates Jonathan's unseemly affection for David in 1 Samuel 20.30), Baldwin seems more interested in how he can use the biblical analogue to suggest the painful sense of election that comes to a boy through his growing awareness of his attraction to another male. The story is an epiphany--a moment of religious revelation--far different than the kind expected by the church faithful as they make their annual Fourth of July outing. As such it is the prototype for the same-sex relationships found in nearly every one of Baldwin's novels, but most particularly for that of Arthur and Crunch in *Just above My Head*, Baldwin's last completed fiction.

5 The "outing" of the story's title has three referents. Most obviously, it refers to a Harlem congregation's holiday daytrip on a boat which travels up the Hudson River, docks at Bear Mountain where the passengers spend the afternoon picnicking and rowing, and departs at dusk to return to Manhattan. During the course of the outing, the adult members of the Mount of Olives Pentacostal Assembly remind two boys--Johnnie, the pubescent son of authoritarian Deacon Grimes, and Johnnie's slightly older friend David Jackson--of their need to be saved. The boys, of course, are on an "outing" of a different kind. In their first expression of burgeoning sexuality, they have pooled their money to buy a birthday gift for Sylvia Daniels; David in particular is troubled by the confusing feelings that she elicits from him. But most subtly the story concerns the homosexual "outing" of Johnnie who is just beginning to understand the nature of the feelings that he has for his best friend.

6 Provocatively, much is anticipated but little actually occurs in "The Outing." Every year the church saints hope that their example will attract the unsaved to join them on their outing, "Gentile, Jew or Greek or sinner." But "the Jews and the Greeks, to say nothing of the Gentiles... showed themselves, year after year, indifferent to the invitation" (20), and far from the Assembly's making any converts this year, "a few of the strangers who had come along on the outing appeared at the doors and stood watching with an uneasy

amusement" while a service is conducted in the ship's ballroom (44). Likewise, when he is not asked to preach that day, Deacon Grimes recognizes that despite his having been pastor of his own church in the south, he is being passed over by the Harlem church's hierarchy; his hope of being allowed to "bring the message Sunday night" (42) will never be fulfilled as long as he remains in Harlem. He is frustrated on the domestic front as well, a bitter exchange with a suddenly independent Johnnie forcing him to realize how much his oldest son resents his tyranny over the family; uncertain what to do, he can only threaten to mete out punishment after they return home. David, Johnnie, and Johnnie's younger brother Roy spend much of the story awaiting the moment when they can approach Sylvia, safe from the watchful eyes of her formidable mother. It finally does not matter that Johnnie is absent when David and Roy seize their one opportunity to present the gift, for they have only a short time to speak with her, and David's awkward hope of romance is shattered when her talk, parroting the adults', is limited to correcting his spiritual state. In the meantime, Johnnie, disappointed after having run off and hoping that David would follow him, sulks in the woods before eventually deciding to rejoin his brother and friend. He finally locates them, however, in a rowboat in the middle of the lake.

> After a long while they saw him [on the shore] and waved and started to bring the boat in so he could join them. But the day was ruined for him; by the time they brought the boat in, the hour, for which they had hired it, was over; David went in search of his mother for more money [so they can rent the boat another hour] but when he came back it was time to leave. (57)

7 Every action attempted in the story is suspended or thwarted; no one returns from the outing untroubled, much less satisfied. What is more, the reader's sense of non-action and unfulfillment is intensified by the quasi-minimalistic and episodic way in which the story is told. Baldwin's narrative moves cinematographically from group to group among the members of the outing, reporting snatches of conversation and scanning the surface of apparently minor and unconnected events. Even the extended description of the shipboard service is broken by Baldwin's play of shifting narrative perspectives. Generally refraining from penetrating any character's interior -- and, thus, allowing his reader insight into motive or cause and effect -- Baldwin creates the impression that nothing of consequence is occurring.

8 But clearly there *is* something taking place behind these facades. Critical changes are occurring even if they are not immediately ascertainable, particularly as regards Johnnie, who comes close to being the story's central intelligence. The outing takes place on Independence Day when America celebrates a transformation -- the creation of a new, independent entity. And everything about the story bespeaks the liminal, the suspension between two spaces or states of being in which neither is eliminated but neither dominates. The story begins as the church members gather on board the boat just before it pulls away from shore, and it concludes shortly before docking again that night; the narrative is concerned with the hours during which the members of the church assembly are suspended in a zone apart from the quotidian and familiar. The boat's passage allows for images of an unseen or sub-surface power that suggest the working of a greater, invisible force:

> Beneath them the strong, indifferent river raged within the channel and the screaming spray pursued them. In the engine room... the ship's gears... rose and fell and chanted. The tremendous bolts of steel seemed almost human, imbued with a relentless force that was not human.(41)

9 The characters are propelled by a force they can neither see nor control, but propelled towards what, or to what purpose, the story does not say.

10 Likewise, although all of the characters may be frustrated in their expectations, the unrelenting *feeling* of expectation that runs through the story nonetheless causes the reader to anticipate an annunciation or revelation of some sort[4] The saints speak of the Spirit "jumping" on one unexpectedly, and pray that the Lord will "touch" David and Johnnie, causing them "to make a noise" and shout to the Lord (38); they repeatedly encourage the boys to "surrender" to the Spirit (37). The boys themselves are uncomfortable being caught between two stages of physical development as they undergo adolescent hormonal changes. Longing for the time when he will be free of his father's tyranny, Roy exclaims, "Be glad when I'm a man" (31). And the boys' comparing notes on their initial growth of body hair and other indications of pubescence drives Roy to ask, "Now ain't this a hell of a conversation for church boys?" (30). Their liminality is even more painfully apparent to the saints than it is to themselves. When they join the saints for the prayer service, they evince

> a striking, even an exciting change; as though their youth, barely begun, were already put away; and the animal, so vividly restless and undiscovered, so tense with power, ready to spring had been already stalked and trapped and offered, a perpetual blood-sacrifice, on the altar of the Lord. Yet their bodies continued to change and grow, preparing them, mysteriously and with ferocious speed, for manhood. No matter how careful their movements, these movements suggested, with a distinctness dreadful for the redeemed to see, the pagan lusting beneath the blood-washed robes. In them was perpetually and perfectly poised the power of revelation against the power of nature; and the saints, considering them with a baleful kind of love, struggled to bring their souls to safety in order, as it were, to steal a march on the flesh while the flesh still slept. (47-48)

11 But whatever the intentions of the saints, on this outing the religious and the sexual zones of experience interpenetrate, religious enthusiasm and sexual fervor overlapping no matter how hard the saints try to separate flesh and spirit, suggesting that contrary to church teaching, nature may itself be the force of revelation leading David and Johnnie forward.

12 "The Outing" thus del portends an annunciation that is never explicitly made, every detail of the story bespeaking a pending release from one state of being into another. Nowhere is this more clear than at the story's close, where the incomplete, suspended actions of the story culminate in an image both mysterious and sinister.

> All during the trip home David seemed preoccupied. When he finally sought out Johnnie he found him sitting alone by himself on the top deck, shivering a little in the night air. He sat down beside him. After a moment Johnnie moved and put his head on David's shoulder. David put his arms around him. But now where there had been peace there was only panic and where there had been safety, danger, like a flower, opened. (57)

13 While Johnnie leans against David, the younger, smaller, more vulnerable boy is quite literally dependent upon his older, stronger protector and friend. In keeping with the rest of the story, the scene is static and silent; nothing of overt significance happens and neither boy speaks. Yet clearly something *has* happened. A mysterious transformation has occurred in their relationship, as indicated by the haunting final image of danger opening before the boys like a flower. Their silence, suggestively, is the result of a fullness of emotion they do not completely understand and about which they do not know how to speak.

14 Like the stories in Joyce's *Dubliners*, "The Outing" hints at a significance that is never directly articulated. Full disclosure *is* made, however, through Baldwin's use of biblical analogues. As their names suggest, David and Johnnie are modern counterparts of biblical David and Jonathan. The narrator of the First Book of Samuel emphasizes the special relationship between King Saul's son and the outsider who comes to court, and who is described as being "ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to" (1 Sam. 16.12). "The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David," the narrator records, "and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Sam. 18.1); "Saul's son delighted much in David" (1 Sam. 19.2). The emotional intensity of their relationship is evident when they suffer a parting at which "they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded" (1 Sam. 20.41). Upon the death of Jonathan, David is left to lament: "I am very distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love was wonderful, passing the love of women" (2 Sam. 1.19-26).

15 Like the biblical pair, Baldwin's David is Johnnie's "especial pal," Johnnie having introduced David to the church where his father is deacon (34). Biblical David opens a rift between Jonathan and Saul, just as Baldwin's David precipitates an angry exchange between Johnnie and Deacon Grimes at the very moment that the boat is pulling away from shore (36). This last detail suggests that what occurs is a defining moment in Johnnie's life, the moment when he leaves his familiar moorings and dares to create an independent existence for himself[5] His emotional dependence upon David in this regard is dramatized shortly afterwards.

> Johnnie and David wandered restlessly up and down the boat alone. They mounted to the topmost deck and leaned over the railing in the deserted stern. Up here the air was sharp and clean. They faced the water, their arms around each other.
> "Your old man was kind of rough this morning," David said, watching the mountains pass.
> "Yes," Johnnie said. He looked at David's face against the sky. He shivered in the sharp, cold air and buried his face in David's shoulder. David looked down at him and tightened his hold.
> "Who do you love?" he whispered. "Who's your boy?"
> "You," he muttered fiercely, "I love you." (42-43)

16 David's coaxing this expression of love from Johnnie is in keeping with Baldwin's reading elsewhere of The First Book of Samuel's suggestion that an unequal passion existed between the two biblical characters (Frontain 42-44)[6]

17 The intensity of Johnnie's love for David is stated outright in one of the few passages in the story in which Baldwin violates a character's interiority. During the religious service,

> Johnnie felt suddenly, not the presence of the Lord, but the presence of David; which seemed to reach out to him, hand reaching out to hand in the fury of flood-time, to drag him to the bottom of the water or to carry him safe to shore. From the corner of his eye he watched his friend, who held him with such power; and felt, for that moment, such a depth of love, such nameless and terrible joy and pain, that he might have fallen, in the face of that company, weeping at David's feet. (51[7]

18 It is David, not the Lord, whose spirit fills Johnnie, the very juxtaposition of the two suggesting the sacrality of Johnnie's love for David. Johnnie's uncertainty about how David will respond--whether his own feeling for David will damn him or save him--is "the abyss which suddenly yawn[s]" before him (53), and anticipates the danger that opens like a flower at the conclusion of the story.

19 Neither Johnnie nor David understands yet the significance of a "love passing the love of woman" that they feel for one another, and the story does not say whether they will accept the strange package in which love has come to them. But if their relationship holds true to the use made of the biblical myth in Baldwin's other narratives, Johnnie--like Giovanni and Joey--will suffer to be loved but eventually abandoned; and David, like his namesake in *Giovanni's Room*, will first be moved to have the younger, weaker male depend so entirely upon him, but then will grow increasingly uncomfortable with his partner's emotional neediness and push him aside. In Baldwin's continued rewriting of the myth, the David figure does not fully understand the significance of the Jonathan figure's love until he has lost it[8] Johnnie and David's end is written in their beginning--if one grasps the workings of Baldwin's biblical archetype.

20 "Now everybody ain't got the same kind of spirit," Father James irenically observes (39), without realizing that the spirit that has seized Johnnie is not the kind of religious inspiration that the saints--and probably not Baldwin's more religiously orthodox readers--might understand. Baldwin uses the biblical analogue to invest Johnnie's feelings for David with a sacramental character, the Bible authorizing a narrative of adolescent homosexual self-discovery for which Baldwin otherwise had no model. The shiver of recognition that Johnnie, and perhaps David as well, has at the conclusion of the story must be juxtaposed with the service on board which is so passionate that even modest Sylvia is moved to shout. The spirit that infuses Johnnie and David, however, is equally sacred, plunging the boys past reason and speech into pregnant silence. For David to reject Johnnie is a sacrilege--as another David will discover in *Giovanni's Room*. For David to deny Johnnie's feelings for him is to fail to say "yes" to life.

21 Only in *Just above My Head*, his final novel, is Baldwin's assertion of the sacrality of human sexual love--and homosexual love, in particular--as fully developed as it is in this short story. Questioning his relationships, narrator Hall articulates the general problem of all Baldwin's novels when he wonders

> if I would find it in myself the strength to give love, and to take it: to accept my nakedness as sacred, and to hold the nakedness of another. For, without love, pleasure's inventions are soon exhausted. There must be a soul within the body you are holding, a soul which you are striving to meet, a soul which is striving to meet yours. (309-10)

22 The ability to accept one's own nakedness as sacred, "and to hold the nakedness of another" as sacred too, is at issue in every one of the multiple relationships in the novel[9] but the theme is most consistently developed in terms of Arthur's relationship with Crunch. As young as he is, Arthur does not question the sexual aspect of their relationship, for "he had not doubted for a moment that all love was holy" (443). Baldwin goes further and infuses Arthur and Crunch's love with the biblical ethos of *yada*, a Hebrew verb which means both to have knowledge of, and to have sexual intercourse with, another person. The boys "were beginning to know each other," the reader is told; "the biblical phrase unlocked itself and held them together in a joy as sharp as terror" (213). Ultimately, what Crunch and Arthur know is "the love which is salvation" (172).

23 The sacral nature of their love is most clearly seen in the exquisite scene in which Arthur and Crunch first consummate their relationship (203-10), Baldwin orchestrating their love-making to the words of a spiritual.

> So high, you can't get over him.
> So low, you can't get under him.
> So wide. You can't get around him. (208)

24 The language of the hymn, which refers to a Christian's search for the divine, takes on a shocking phallic double entendre since in this scene Crunch is teaching Arthur to perform fellatio. It is this very sexual exhileration that Arthur knows with Crunch, who becomes the god of Arthur's affections, that Johnnie is on the verge of knowing with David in "The Outing."

25 As his first published treatment of homosexuality, "The Outing" is a kind of self-outing on Baldwin's part. The very brevity of the short story format allows Baldwin to maintain what D. A. Miller (chap. 6) calls a "secret subject" that is an "open secret.[10] Homosexuality is never expressed, members of the church community remaining blind to the drama that is taking place in their midst, and Johnnie himself unable to name his feelings for David. But Baldwin's use of the biblical prototype allows him to suggest the nature of that love without openly stating it. The story is about an "outing" in this final sense as well, Baldwin writing allusively or elliptically to capture the mixed feeling of fear and excitement as David and Johnnie prepare to unwrap the strange package, love.

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NOTES

1. Presumably recounting what he learned from Baldwin directly, biographer Weatherby reports that the novelist was forced by his publisher "to tone down the homosexual ending of the first novel" (133).

2. "The Outing," first published in New Story, is collected in Going to Meet the Man (1965), the text that I quote.

3. The biblical significance of the names David and Johnnie was suggested by Georges-Michel Sarotte (54-60) when he paralleled their relationship with that of David and Giovanni in Baldwin's later novel. Sarotte, however, makes the identification only in passing and fails to develop the thematic significance for the novels that followed Baldwin's publication of the story. Bergman likewise makes the identification (155), but sees the sacral element working against the homosexual element in the story.

4. For example, the reader is told that Johnnie's "mother, on all social occasions, seemed fearfully distracted, as though she awaited, at any moment, some crushing and irrevocable disaster" (32).

5. The parallel between Saul and Deacon Grimes goes further. Just as King Saul suffers to be told by the prophet Samuel that the Lord "hath also rejected thee from being king" (1 Sam. 15.23), Johnnie's father is passed over as a preacher by Father James.

6. That Johnnie's attraction to David is more powerful than the latter's regard for him is suggested elsewhere in the story: when the boys are discussing how they can mark Sylvia's birthday and Johnnie eagerly asks David the date of his own (30); when a slip on Johnnie's part acknowledges that David's is stronger than his own interest in Sylvia (40); and when Johnnie unsuccessfully tries to lure David away from Sylvia and Roy by going off on his own, hoping that David will follow (52).

7. The conflict between the Lord and David as the object of Johnnie's attention parallels an earlier scene in which Sister Daniels grumbles to Sylvia, "'You got to get closer to the Lord.' Sylvia smiled and bit her lip; she cast a glance at David" (38), suggesting that David supplants thoughts of the Lord in Sylvia's mind as well. Throughout the story, Sylvia is loosely associated with biblical Michal as Johnnie/Jonathan's rival for David's affection. A curious reversal takes place, however, in that Sylvia is first seized by the Spirit and shouts during the shipboard service, whereas Michal is cursed for disparaging David's enthusiasm in dancing naked before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam. 6.13-23). Sister Daniels' earlier comment (38-39), though, raises the possibility of shouting as sexual hysteria, and Sylvia's preaching to David (55) is in keeping with Michal's attempt to restrain the "power of nature" that manifests itself in biblical David's exuberance.

8. Biographer Leeming describes the dynamic of Baldwin's love relationships with other men (76). Attracted primarily to heterosexual men unlikely to reciprocate his feelings, Baldwin repeatedly created tragedy for himself by investing his emotional capital in men by whom he inevitably felt betrayed. The resulting sense of loss is reflected in his fiction where Baldwin creates homosexual characters who love deeply and open themselves to being hurt by their lovers. It is why, I suspect, Baldwin identified so strongly with biblical Jonathan. Capable of loving another male "as his own soul," he nevertheless did not expect to be appreciated by the other until *after* the relationship had failed.

The appearance of Leeming's superb biography after my article on *Giovanni's Room* had already been set in print prevented me from taking advantage of the evidence he offers that confirms parts of my thesis regarding Baldwin's fascination with the biblical David story. Leeming, for example, quotes Baldwin saying that the name David is "special to me" (196), confirming that Baldwin did indeed feel a special attraction to men named David. Leeming's descriptions of Baldwin in love, however, would have allowed me to withdraw my complaint that this was a blank space in existing descriptions of him, and have allowed me to speculate on the extent to which Baldwin himself, like his character David, was made to feel uncomfortable by a lover's unsettling sexual and emotional neediness. Leeming's filling in that space forces me to revise my hypothesis that Baldwin identified with both David and Jonathan. As Leeming makes clear, Baldwin was invariably the more needy partner.

9. Sex between Crunch and Julia, for example, is described as an act of prayer. In their first union, Julia feels "as though his lunging body would touch and open and drench and heal her soul. He, as it were, prayed with her" (240).

10. What is so powerful about this short story's reworking of the biblical David archetype is that it records a single action--the boys' growing awareness of the intensity of their feelings for each other--and freezes the frame at that moment of recognition. Baldwin is less successful when he tries to show the full development of a relationship. His novels after *Another Country* are diffused, even the haunting relationship of Arthur and Crunch losing its impact as *Just above My Head* rambles on. "The Outing" is powerful because it does not betray the boys' uncertainty about where their relationship will proceed.

Clearly, I disagree with Bergman's thesis that "The Outing" focuses upon "that crucial moment when the childlike love of one boy for another is transformed into the adult awareness of the sinfulness of same-sex affection" (155). While arguing the overt antagonism of the black evangelical church to the boys' relationship, additionally, Bergman confuses Johnnie's ireful father, Deacon Grimes, with the irenic church pastor, Father James (155), a confusion that does serious injustice to the latter's character.

RÉSUMÉS

Le sujet de "La Sortie Annuelle", de James Baldwin, est la découverte de la vie par un adolescent et sa réaction face à l'étrange expérience qu'est l'amour. Baldwin s'inspire ici de l'histoire biblique de David et Jonathan pour suggérer le caractère sacré de l'amour que son héros Johnnie ressent pour son ami David. Bien que connaître le texte de la Bible permette au lecteur de prévoir la douleur qui affligera les héros si le père de Johnnie vient à découvrir l'homosexualité de son fils, Baldwin semble préférer utiliser le parallèle biblique pour évoquer la difficulté qu'éprouve un jeune homme lorsqu'il se sent élu, qu'il prend progressivement conscience de son attirance pour un autre homme. L'histoire est une épiphanie bien différente de celles qu'attendent les fidèles de l'Eglise lorsqu'ils participent à la procession du 4 juillet. A ce titre, elle reflète les relations homosexuelles que l'on trouve dans presque tous les romans de Baldwin, et plus particulièrement de celle entre Arthur et Crunch, dans Juste au-dessus de ma tête. (Traduit par Isold de GOËTLOGON)

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